

The Economics and Ethics of Food

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“Eating is an agricultural act.” These are the words of Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, writer, and philosopher.ⁱ “Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as ‘consumers.’”

“Eating is a moral act.” These are the words of Brother David Andrews, former Executive Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.ⁱⁱ “Our tables need to include those who've been excluded. Our talk needs to include our farmers, their families, the rural communities, our environment, our landscape, our countryside, religious and moral values. By our [food] choices we shape our world.”

Through the simple act of eating, we become interdependent with the land and with each other. We become interconnected with the physical energy that permeates the earth and everything upon it and the spiritual energy that transcends the earth that gives our lives purpose and meaning. We are more than consumers. We are co-creators of the ecological, social, and economic world in which we live out our lives and in which those of future generations must live out theirs as well. Our food choices carry with them tremendous responsibilities, which for the most part, have been blissfully ignored.

As a society, we have allowed our food choices to be driven by economics, rather than values or ethics. As a result, our never-ending quest for cheap food has had unintended and largely unacknowledged ecological and social consequences. Through our choices of cheap food, we have encouraged the industrialization of agriculture in an effort to make agriculture more economically efficient. As a consequence, American agriculture has been transformed from small, diversified, independently operated, family farms into large-scale, specialized, corporately controlled, agribusinesses.

Admittedly, the increases in economic efficiency have been impressive but no more so than the human costs. Economists have totaled up tremendous savings for consumers from lower food costs, but they have placed little if any value on the lives of farm families that have been destroyed by the loss of their farms, their way of life, and their heritage. In addition, as economic pressures forced farm families to abandon rural areas, thousands of small farming communities have withered and died. Rural communities – rural schools, churches, and businesses – have also paid a high cost for cheap food.

The ecological costs of cheap food are equally impressive. Today, only the most diehard industrialists bother to deny that industrial agricultural practices have degraded the productivity of the land through erosion and contamination and polluted the natural environment with agricultural chemicals. We are still as dependent on the health of the earth – soil, water, air – for our food as in the days of hunters and gathers. Our connections with the land are more complex and less direct but are no less critical to our very survival.

With increasing corporate control of agriculture we are threatening the food security of our nation and all nations. Economists argue that it doesn't matter where our food is produced. If producing food elsewhere in the world will be cheaper, then any nation would be better off without agriculture – without farmers. Where would that leave people in the poorer nations of the world, or even the poorer people in wealthy nations such as the U.S.? Global agriculture today produces more than enough food to provide an adequate diet for everyone in the world. However, more than one-billion people are undernourished – about 15% of global population.ⁱⁱⁱ Even in the U.S., more than 36 million people – more than 10% of the population – were “food insecure” in 2007.^{iv} Hunger, being closely correlated with poverty, has undoubtedly risen with the current economic recession. Obviously, the quest for cheap food has not ensured global or even national food security.

The multinational corporations that increasingly control agriculture are purely economic entities. They are not people – they have no heart, no soul, nor citizenship in any particular country. The economy simply places no value on doing anything solely for the benefit of anyone else. Corporations produce food wherever in the world it can be produced at the lowest cost and sell food to whomever in the world is willing and able to pay the highest prices – which will not include poor people. If we keep doing what we have been doing, we will keep getting what we have been getting. If we keep focusing on cheap food, the poor people of the world will continue to go hungry.

However, a corporately controlled world will not be a world of abundance. In the relentless quest for ever greater economic efficiency, corporate agriculture is depleting the natural productivity of the soil through its reliance on commercial fertilizers and pesticides. Industrial agriculture is destroying the biological life of the soil and thus destroying the ability of the earth to support life in the future. Industrial agriculture also is polluting the atmosphere with greenhouse gasses as it remains inherently dependent on fossil energy. An industrial agriculture is quite simply not sustainable in a world confronted by catastrophic climate change and the imminent depletion of recoverable fossil energy. We are risking the future of humanity to make agriculture more “economically efficient.”

To address the problems of food security, our food decisions must focus on ethics rather than economics. Corporations are purely economic beings. They are neither moral nor immoral; they are amoral. Real people, on the other hand, have the capacity to make decisions based on empathy, compassion, respect, fairness, and responsibility. Even in a corporate world of food abundance, the poor would still go hungry.

Many of us have been vaguely aware of these things. However, we rationalize; the negative consequences of the industrializing and corporatizing our food system surely are not our fault. We are just one “consumer;” we can't possibly be held responsible for what's happening in an entire food sector of the global economy. The industrialization of agriculture was an inevitable consequence of economic progress, so we have been led to believe. The corporatization of the global food system was necessary to achieve the economic benefits of free trade, we were told. What can we, as individuals, possibly do about such things?

We can begin by recognizing that eating is a moral act. Our food choices are a reflection of our personal social and ethical values, of our morality. Our choices should not reflect what we think we can or can't do to change the world. Our food choices should reflect of what we think is fundamentally right and good – not only for ourselves but also for others, including those of future generations.

Through ethical food choices, we can make it easier for those farmers who are committed to maintaining the natural productivity of the land and the quality of life in rural and urban communities to make a decent living on the land. When we choose to buy natural, organic, sustainably produced foods from local farmers, we are helping to restore ecological and social integrity. Through ethical food choices, we can make it easier for those who are poor to find ways to feed themselves. We can grow some of our own food and help others learn to do likewise. By supporting local food systems we can provide opportunities for low income people to buy high quality food at lower prices – by buying food raw or minimally processed forms. Eighty cents of every dollar spend at the supermarket today pays for processing, packaging, preparation, transportation, and advertising. By learning and teaching others to prepare local foods from scratch, we can help make good food affordable for almost everyone.

In summary, the highly touted productivity and efficiency of our corporate food system is an economic illusion. Food in America isn't really all cheap; most of us are simply in a position to avoid paying the full costs of food. Some our food costs have been paid by family farmers who have been driven out of business or to the verge of bankruptcy. Some costs have been paid by rural communities that have withered and died as farm families have been forced off the land. And some have been paid by migrant farm workers and other food industry workers who see no alternative to exploitative wages and working conditions. These unpaid costs are paid by people who, through no fault of their own, are at the mercy of those with more economic power.

Much of our food costs today are being billed to our children, grandchildren, and others of future generations. When our choices of cheap food lead to environmental degradation and social injustice, we are not really avoiding those costs; we are simply charging them to future generations by destroying the social and ecological foundation for their economy. Those of future generations can't choose to pay the full cost of food nor can they redirect government programs to ensure agricultural sustainability. They are depending on us.

Eating is a moral act. Whether we choose cheap food or choose to pay the full cost of food, it is also a moral choice. Our individual food choices – taken together – can change the global food system, change the world, and change the future of humanity. However, ethical food choices are not a matter of whether we really believe we can change the world, but instead, a matter of what we believe to be a fundamentally right and good way of life.

End Notes

ⁱ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For*, “The Pleasures of Eating,” (New York; North Point Press, 1990) p. 145.

ⁱⁱ David Andrews, “Eating is a Moral Act,” NCRLC Reports and Presentations, 2002, http://www.ncrlc.com/ncrlc-RP-webpages/web01_ncrlcRP.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ For real time statistics, see *Stop the Hunger*, <http://www.stopthehunger.com/>.

^{iv} Mark Nord, M. Andrews, S. Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States*, USDA, 2007.